



# Leveraging electron spin driven photocatalytic hydrogen evolution ability of BiVO<sub>4</sub> via crystal facet engineering and iron ion infiltration strategies

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## ABSTRACT

An electron spin regulated hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) for photocatalyst is significant to understand the underlying photocatalytic mechanism. Here, the iron with gradient distribution in BiVO<sub>4</sub> can successfully activate HER of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Mechanical performance calculations indicate that doped Fe<sup>3+</sup> replacing V site can form stable chemical structure for BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Theoretical calculations suggest that the photo-generated electrons migrate from bulk to defect sites in surface layers of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The doped Fe ions effectively improves the carrier transport ability and significantly reduces the carrier recombination probability. Electron spin state change of the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) enhances evidently the current density in photocatalysis, and increases markedly the HER performance compared with that of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. More importantly, the magnetization further prolongs carrier lifetime and optimizes rate determining step free energy of water dissociation for Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Our work opens a new way to understand the effect of magnetic field controlling spin states on photocatalytic HER.

## 1. Introduction

The worsening energy crisis and environmental issues have posed a serious threat to ecosystems over the past decades [1–3]. Nowadays, photocatalytic reactions show considerable promise in energy conversion [4,5], such as water splitting [6], CO<sub>2</sub> reduction [7,8], organic pollutant removal [9,10], and synthesis of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> [11], etc. The conversion of solar energy to H<sub>2</sub> through photocatalytic splitting of water is one of the attractive solutions to human energy and environmental problems [12]. A large number of semiconductor materials (such as CdS [13,14] and BiVO<sub>4</sub> [15,16] etc) have attracted extensive attention [17]. Among them, BiVO<sub>4</sub> with monoclinic scheelite structure is favoured because of its suitable band gap (2.4 eV), chemical stability and harmlessness [18]. Its potential photocatalytic activity derives from Bi 6 s orbital hybridization [19]. However, the low mobility of photo-generated carriers (0.044 cm<sup>2</sup>•V<sup>-1</sup>•s<sup>-1</sup>) due to unconnected VO<sub>4</sub> remains one of

disadvantageous factors to improve the photocatalytic activity of BiVO<sub>4</sub> [20].

To improve the photocatalytic activity of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, researchers have developed various strategies to solve the problems of poor charge separation and transfer efficiency, including regulation of the crystal facet [21], construction of heterojunctions [22,23], noble metal deposition [24] and ion doping [25,26]. Among them, doping can modulate the electronic structure of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, promote charge transfer, accelerate the interfacial and bulk charge separation [27,28]. For example, Polo et al. synthesized BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes containing Mo<sup>6+</sup> dopant, and found that increasing the amount of Mo<sup>6+</sup> dopant could both improve electron transport in BiVO<sub>4</sub> by increasing its conductivity and promote charge transfer on the electrode/electrolyte in the absence of hole scavenger [29]. Zhong et al. used In<sup>3+</sup> as a dopant to replace the sites of Bi<sup>3+</sup> in BiVO<sub>4</sub>, which inhibited the surface charge recombination and enhanced the water oxidation activity on the BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode. Yin et al.

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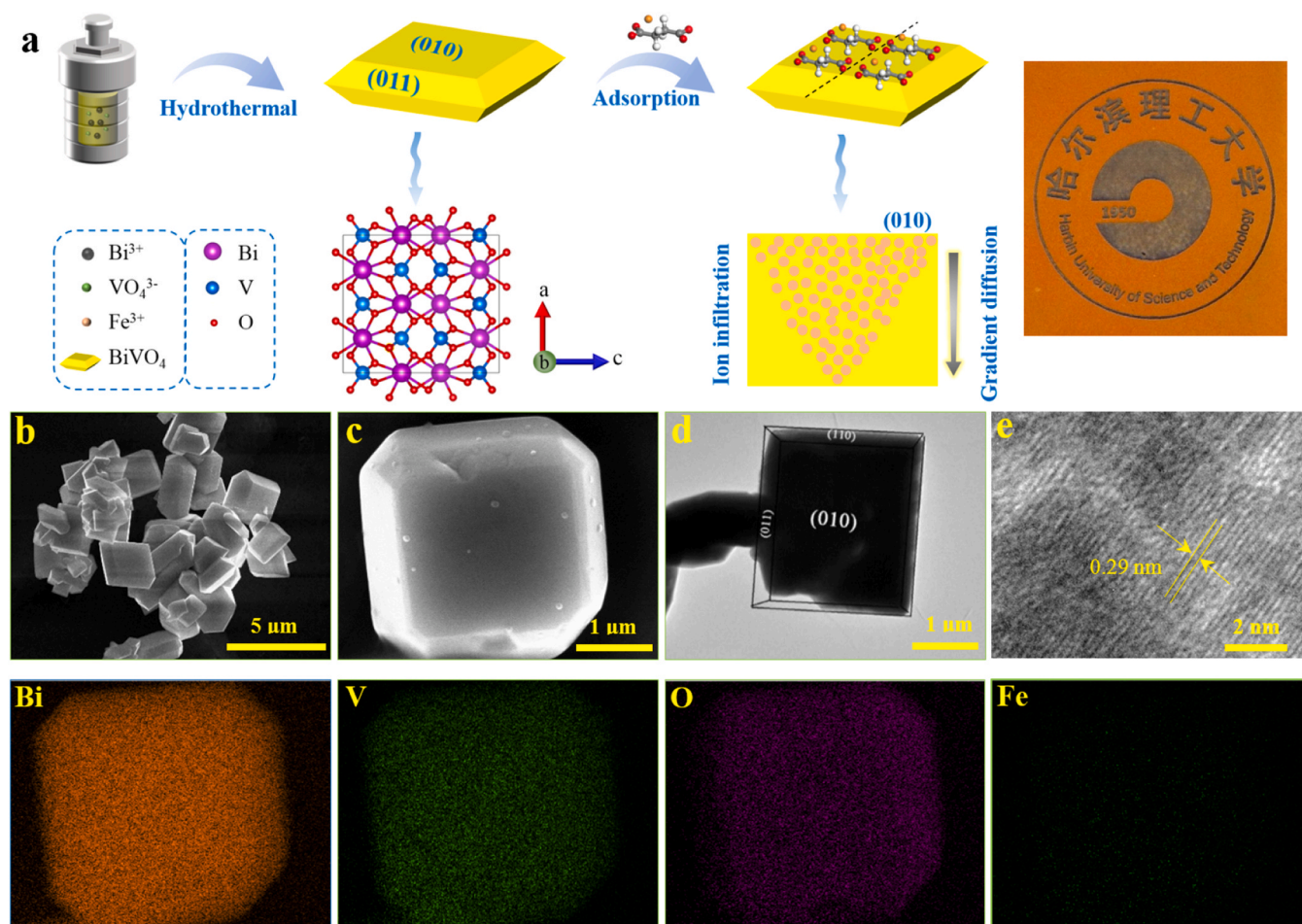
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**Fig. 1.** (a) Schematic of the preparation process of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . Right inset is optical image of  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . SEM images of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  (b) and  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  (c). TEM (d) and HRTEM (e) images of  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . The element mapping images correspond to  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ .

synthesized Mo-doped  $\text{BiVO}_4$  films with high porosity by replacing some sites of V with Mo ions, which the photocurrent was 6.91 times higher than that of pristine  $\text{BiVO}_4$  [30]. In addition, Regmi et al. synthesized Fe doped monoclinic  $\text{BiVO}_4$  by microwave-hydrothermal method, which improved the visible light absorption and the photocatalytic activity [31]. The improved performance can be attributed to the efficient charge transfer and separation [32]. It looks that refining the essential scientific issues of doping and further effectively linking it with the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance is a fundamental scientific issue. Recently, Zhang et al. investigated the electron-hole recombination dynamics for different electron spin structures and different Ov concentrations in bulk  $\text{BiVO}_4$  [33]. This result indicates that the spin polarization results in the suppression of its electron-hole recombination by spin protection mechanism. Several spintronics works have also shown the applied magnetic field can enhance HER and  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction capabilities throughout the catalytic process [34–36]. Especially, further exploration is needed to understand how doping ions with spin properties can increase the electron spin state and enhance the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance. Therefore, it is very vital to design an effective model to embody the electron spin contribution in  $\text{BiVO}_4$  substrate. The work on  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  substitution of accurate metal sites in the  $\text{BiVO}_4$  lattice is rarely mentioned. To the best of our knowledge, the regulation of electron spin state in  $\text{BiVO}_4$  to enhance its HER activity is yet to be explored.

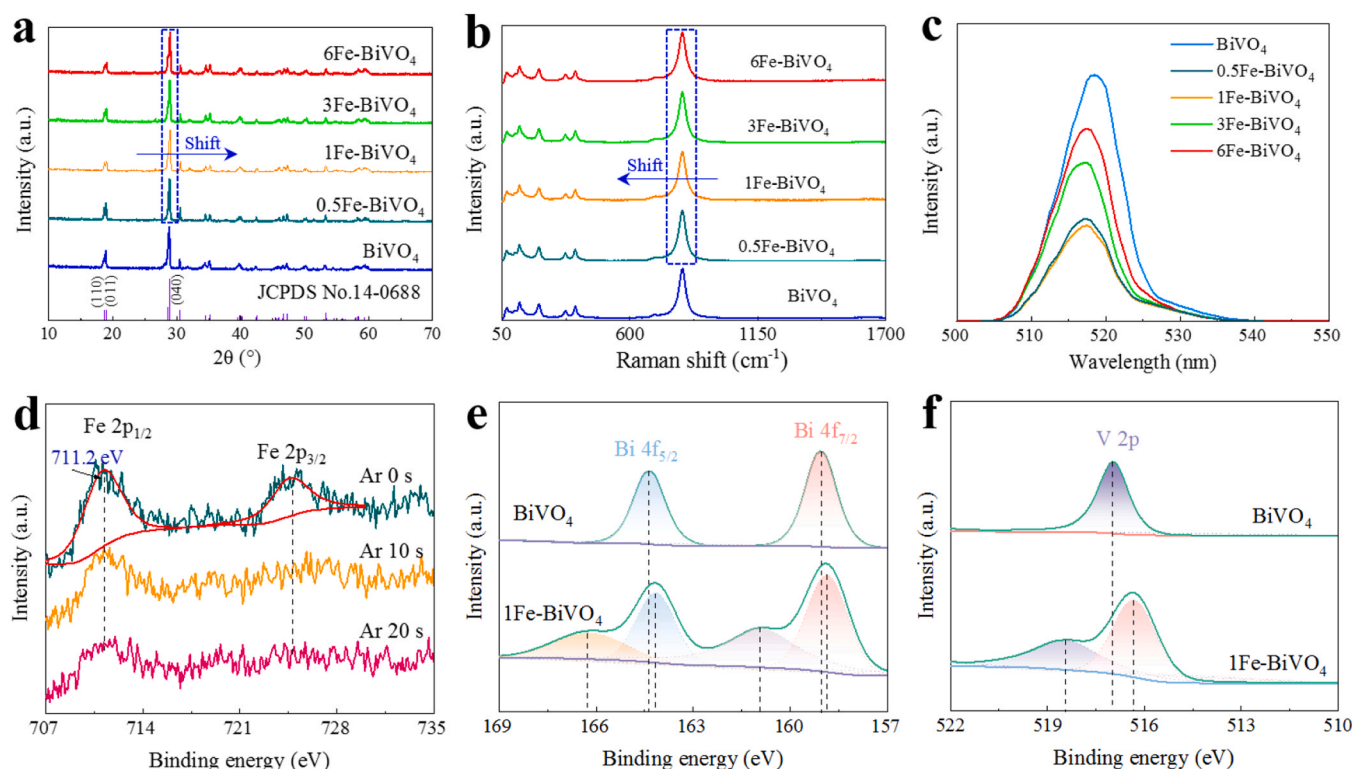
Considering reported work has indicated that the (010) surface of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  has higher photocatalytic activity [37], we investigated the stability of the Fe substitution V site based on engineered (010) surface of  $\text{BiVO}_4$ . Here, the electron spin state control strategy is used to enhance

the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance of  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . Then, the origin of photocatalytic activity was studied through various methods such as electrochemical, optics and DFT. Finally, the effective mechanism of the electron spin state regulating photocatalytic activity in  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  is discussed in detail.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1. Materials and preparation

All the reagents employed were commercially available and analytically pure. They were purchased from Sinopharm Group Chemical Reagent Co. and used without any purification. 3.693 g of  $\text{Bi}(\text{NO}_3)_3$  was dissolved in 15 mL of  $\text{HNO}_3$  (1 M) and stirred with a magnetic stirrer until the solution became clear. The solution was named liquid A. 0.8775 g of  $\text{NH}_4\text{VO}_3$  was dissolved in 15 mL of  $\text{NaOH}$  (2 M) and stirred with a magnetic stirrer until the solution was clear. The solution was named liquid B. Added liquid B to liquid A slowly, and adjusted the pH value of mixed solution to 7 with  $\text{NaOH}$ . Placed the mixed solution in a reaction vessel and carried out a hydrothermal reaction ( $180^\circ\text{C}$  for 12 h). After the washing and drying, a light yellow  $\text{BiVO}_4$  solid powder was obtained. Magnetized  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  samples were named  $\text{BiVO}_4$  (Mag) and  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  (Mag). Iron succinate was used as a source of iron. The dose of iron succinate was  $2.67 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ . First,  $\text{BiVO}_4$  with an Fe doping mass ratio of 0.1% was prepared by placing 1.0 g of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  into a 200 mL beaker and adding 200 mL of distilled water. Stirred in the dark for 30 min, then 0.375 mL of iron succinate was taken and added slowly to the solution. After sintering ( $450^\circ\text{C}$  for 3 h) above dried



**Fig. 2.** (a) XRD spectra of samples. (b) Raman spectra of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . (c) PL spectra of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . (d) Evolution of Fe 2p XPS spectra as a function of  $\text{Ar}^+$  etching time for 1Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$ . High resolution XPS of Bi 4f (e) and V 2p (f) for  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and 1Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$ .

sample, obtained sample was named 1Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$ . A comparable sample 1Fe  $\text{BiVO}_4$  (h) was prepared relative to 1Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$  by directly adding iron nitrate to the precursor solution. Iron-doped  $\text{BiVO}_4$  samples with mass ratios of 0.05%, 0.3% and 0.6% were prepared according to the above method. The samples were named 0.5Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$ , 3Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$  and 6Fe- $\text{BiVO}_4$ , respectively.

## 2.2. Sample characterizations

The crystal structure of the samples was examined by X-ray diffractometer (XRD, X'Pert PRO), excited by Cu-K $\alpha$  radiation, and the samples were scanned in the diffraction angle range of 5–80°. The microscopic morphologies were observed by scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Apreo C) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM, JEM-2100). Photoluminescence spectra (PL) were measured by fluorescence spectrophotometer (RF-6000). Optical properties were studied by UV-Vis diffuse reflectance spectroscopy (UV-Vis DRS, UV-2600). TR-PL spectra of samples were observed by a spectrometer (FLS-1000, 325 nm excitation). The surface structures of samples were analysed by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, Kratos Axis Ultra DLD) with Al K $\alpha$  rays ( $h\nu=1486.6$  eV) as the excitation source. Raman spectroscopy was performed using an instrument (LabRAM HR) with 532 nm excitation, yielding test results of the Raman scattering peaks of the samples. The specific surface area of the samples was tested by the specific surface and pore size analyzer (3 H-2000PS2), and the Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) method was used to calculate the specific surface area of the photocatalyst. The photothermal effect of samples were tested with an instrument (Fotric 225 s-V2-L24). All samples were tested for electrochemical performance using an electrochemical workstation (VMP3) with a standard three-electrode electrolysis system (reference electrode: Ag/AgCl electrode; counter electrode: Pt electrode; working electrode: conductive FTO surface coated with sample as working electrode). The equipment used for magnetizing the sample is a magnetometer (NH-20). The magnetic field is 0–5000 Oe.

## 2.3. Photocatalytic activity tests

Photocatalytic hydrogen production: triethanolamine was used as a sacrificial agent. 5 mL of triethanolamine and 45 mL of deionized water were mixed, and 10 mg sample to be tested was added to above solution. The prepared system was irradiated with a 300 W xenon lamp to test photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production, and after each reaction, the generated  $\text{H}_2$  was sampled and quantified by GC-7900 gas chromatograph with a thermal conductivity detector (TCD). Argon gas was used as the carrier gas. Photocatalytic generation of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ : 5 mg of the prepared photocatalyst was placed in 40 mL of 5% acid solution. The  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  concentration was measured with a spectrophotometer (UV-2600) and the absorbance of the intermediate solution was recorded at certain time intervals. The above steps were repeated to test the absorbance values.

## 2.4. Calculation details

The electronic structure (energy band structure and real space wave function) and mechanical properties (bulk elastic modulus and elastic constants) of the materials were calculated in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) using density functional theory (DFT). Dynamic properties the materials were calculated by ab initio molecular dynamics (AIMD). Simulated  $\text{BiVO}_4/\text{water}$  and  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4/\text{water}$  systems with 40 explicit water molecules were utilized. We used the Nosé-Hoover thermostat to balance the temperature of systems [38,39]. The cut-off energy was set to 425 eV, the convergence criterion of the force acting on each atom in the relaxation was 0.01 eV  $\text{\AA}^{-1}$ , here energy convergence criterion was  $10^{-4}$  eV, and KPOINTS was chosen to be  $3 \times 3 \times 2$ . More calculation details were given in [Supporting Information](#).



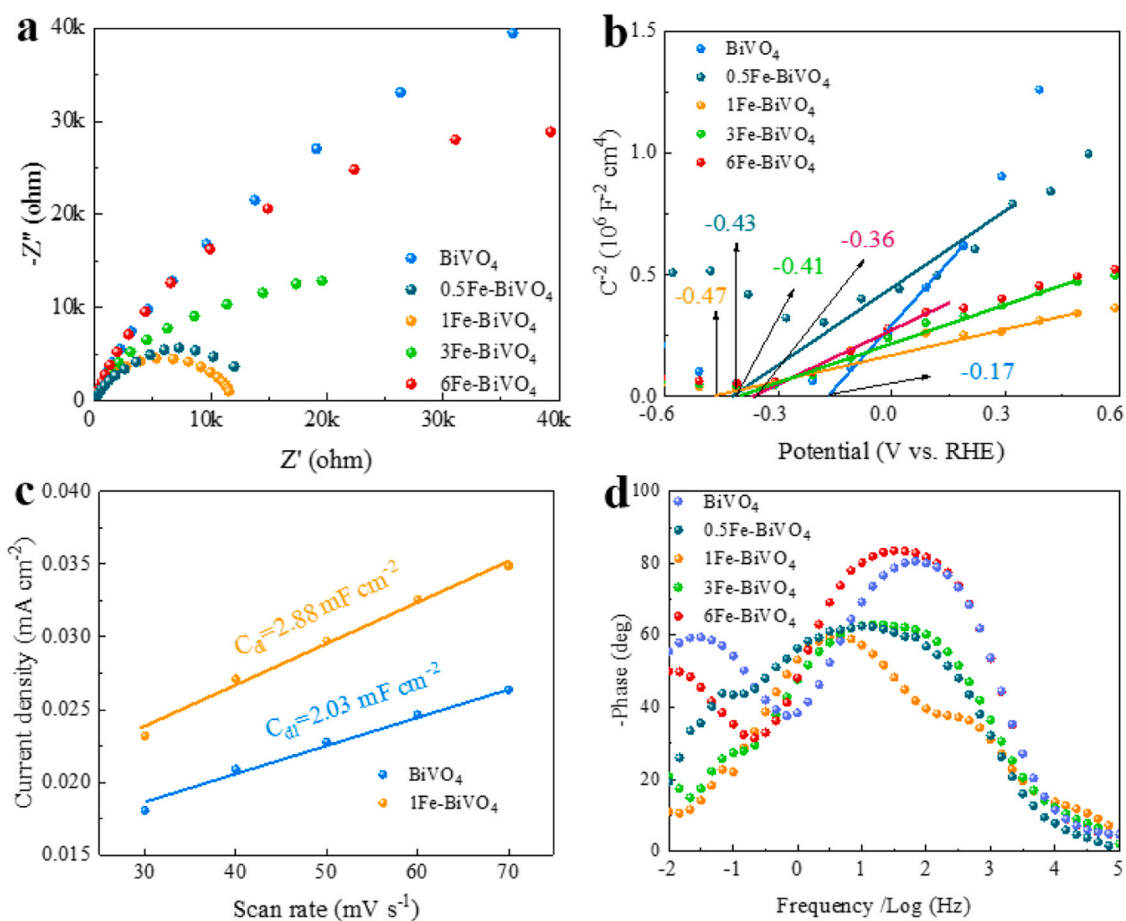


Fig. 3. (a) EIS diagram of samples. (b) Mott-Schottky diagram of samples. (c) Comparison of the bilayer capacitance of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (d) Bader phase angle of samples.

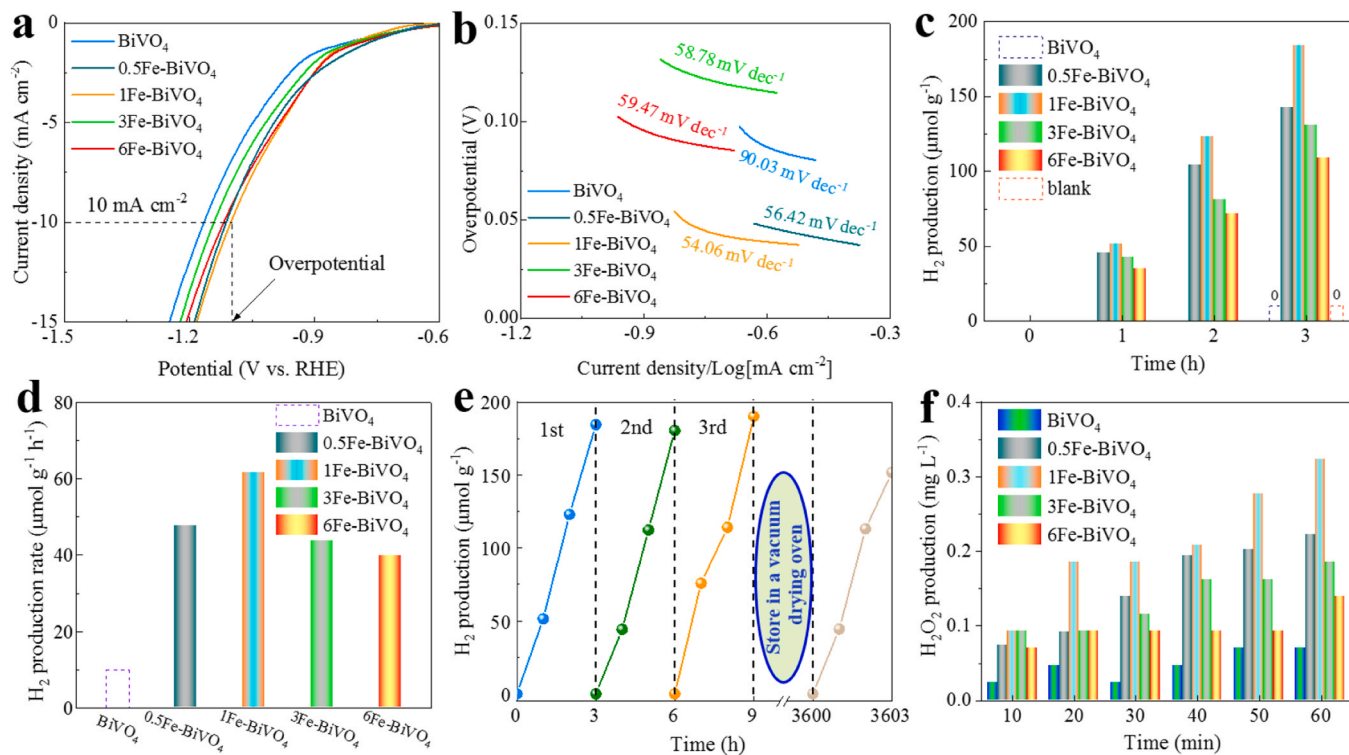
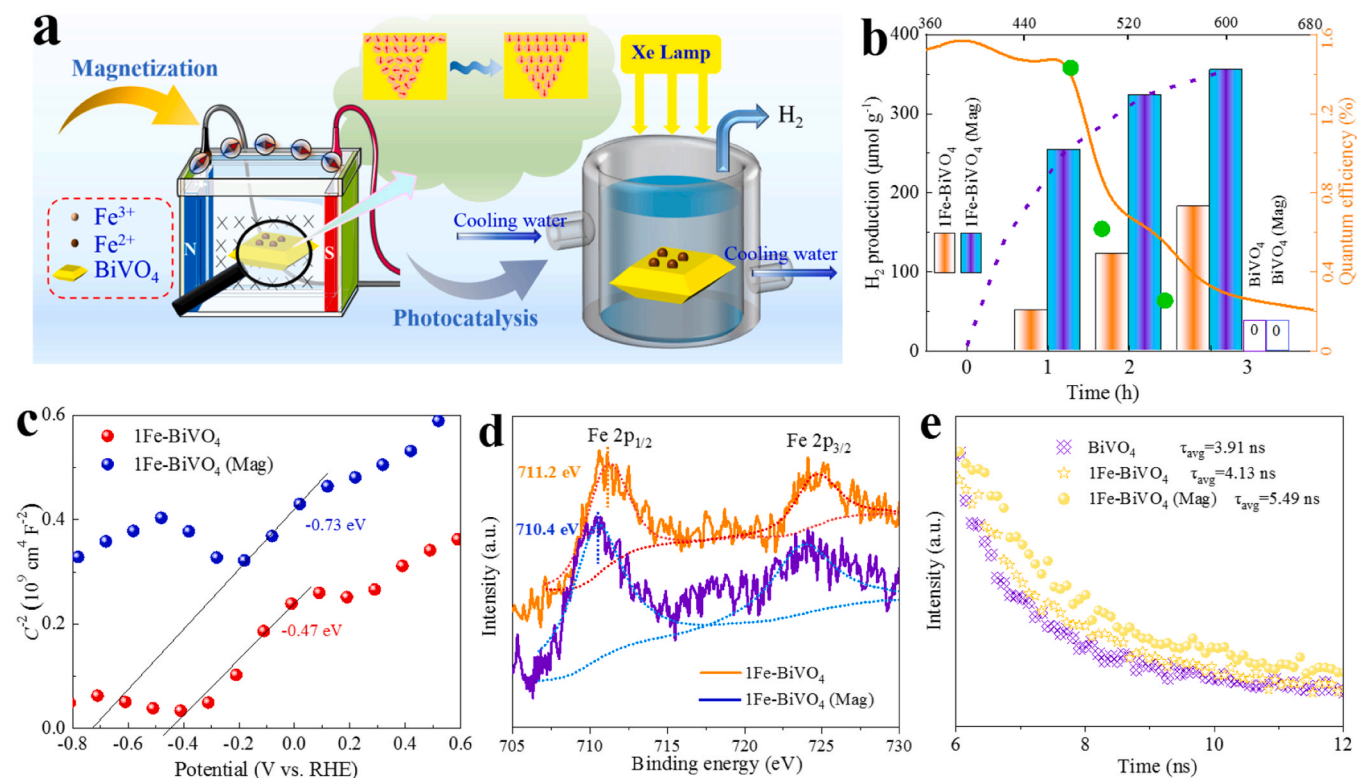


Fig. 4. Photocatalytic performance of the samples. (a) LSV curves. (b) Tafel slope. (c) Hydrogen production abilities. (d) Hydrogen production rate. (e) Cycled hydrogen production of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (f) H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production content.





**Fig. 5.** (a) Magnetization treatment before photocatalytic reaction. Magnetization time is 5 min. (b) Photocatalytic hydrogen evolution. (c) Electrochemical performances for 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag).

**Table 1**

Comparison of the hydrogen production rate of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> with other reported photocatalysts.

Photocatalysts	Sacrificial agents	Light source	H <sub>2</sub> production rate (μmol g <sup>-1</sup> h <sup>-1</sup> )	Ref.
BiVO <sub>4</sub> /rGO	C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>5</sub> OH	200 W Hg-Xe lamp	11.50	[62]
BiVO <sub>4</sub> QDs	None	300 W Xenon lamp	2.63	[63]
BiVO <sub>4</sub> @ TiO <sub>2</sub>	CH <sub>3</sub> OH	300 W Xenon lamp	30.00	[64]
1Fe-BiVO <sub>4</sub>	TEOA	300 W Xenon lamp	61.51	This work
1Fe-BiVO <sub>4</sub> (Mag)	TEOA	300 W Xenon lamp	254.36 /1 h	This work
1Fe-BiVO <sub>4</sub> (Mag)	TEOA	300 W Xenon lamp	161.88 /2 h	This work
1Fe-BiVO <sub>4</sub> (Mag)	TEOA	300 W Xenon lamp	118.54 /3 h	This work

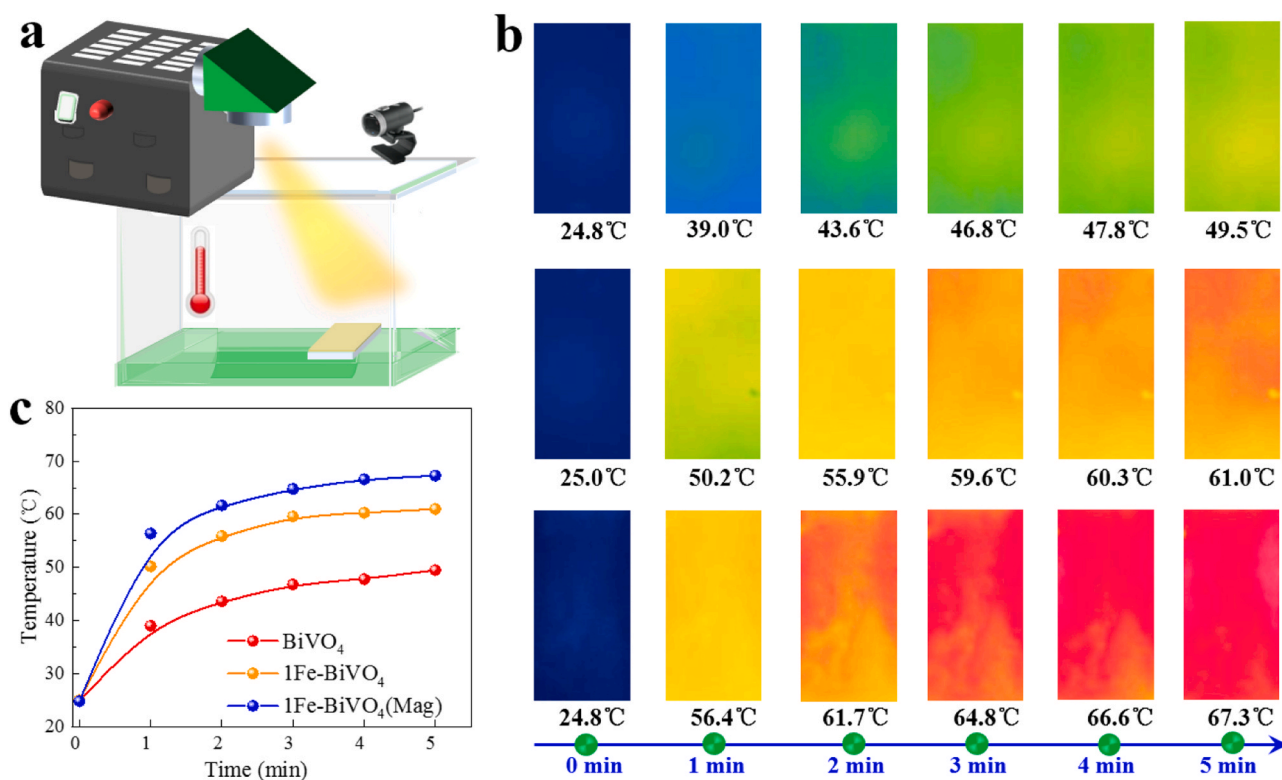
### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Fabrication, microstructure and electrochemical characterizations

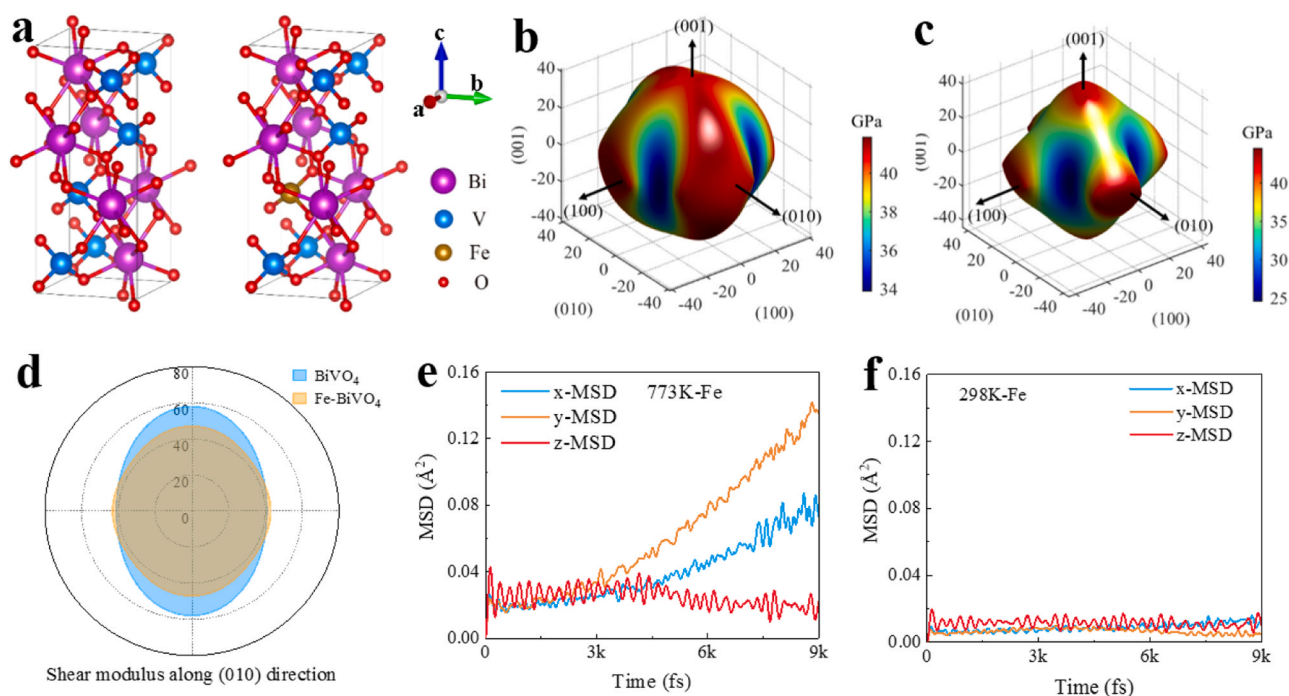
BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples were prepared by hydrothermal method as shown in Fig. 1a. In a typical synthesis, Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples were prepared by infiltration strategy. SEM and TEM images show that BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples are decahedral structures with highly exposed (010) facets (Figs. 1b-d). As can be seen, the BiVO<sub>4</sub> before and after doping is plate feature. Note that the main exposed surface of the crystal surface is the (010) facet. The doping of Fe does not affect the morphology of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. HRTEM image confirmed that the lattice distance of 0.29 nm (Fig. 1e), indicating that the main crystal facet of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is (010) facet [40,41]. The subsequent element mapping images confirm the uniform distribution of each element in the system. However, direct

addition of Fe<sup>3+</sup> during hydrothermal process disrupts the regular morphology growth of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (h) crystal (see Fig. S1).

The crystal structures of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> show that there are four major diffraction peaks at 18.67°, 18.99°, 28.82° and 30.55° (Fig. 2a), corresponding to the (110), (011), (-121) and (040) crystal plane diffraction peaks of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, respectively. The diffraction peaks of both BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> conform to the monoclinic structure of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (ICSD No. 14-0688), but some diffraction peaks of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are slightly shifted to higher diffraction angle. This may be due to fact that the radius of Fe<sup>3+</sup> ion (1.17 Å) is smaller than that of V<sup>5+</sup> ion (1.22 Å), and the Fe element can be doped into the lattice of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The Fe-doping produces a slight lattice contraction. Detailed XRD peak shifting of sample can be seen in Fig. S2. And there are no other diffraction peaks in the XRD pattern of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. In addition, direct addition of Fe<sup>3+</sup> during hydrothermal process can maintain the monoclinic structure of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (h) crystal (Fig. S3). As shown in Fig. 2b, Raman spectroscopy analysis of the prepared samples observed vibrational peaks at about 208.2 cm<sup>-1</sup>, 367.4 cm<sup>-1</sup> and 824.3 cm<sup>-1</sup> for both BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples, which is consistent with previous reports [42]. For BiVO<sub>4</sub> photocatalyst, the characteristic band at 824.3 cm<sup>-1</sup> is assigned to asymmetric and symmetric forms of V-O bond stretching vibrations [43]. Furthermore, a reduction of vibration frequency was observed for the Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples. Fig. S4 gives the detailed Raman peak shifting of samples. It suggests that the Fe-O bond has strong covalent bonding interactions, leading to a change in the degree of electron localization. PL is caused by the recombination of photo-generated electron-hole pairs, which can reflect the features of carrier separation, transfer and migration [44]. Fig. 2c shows the PL spectra of the samples under 260 nm light excitation. The BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample has an intense emission peak at 516 nm, while the PL intensities of the Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples are significantly lower than that of the pure BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample, which signifies a higher separation efficiency of photo-generated carriers in Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples. The chromaticity coordinates of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples show slightly different color gamut, indicating that the PL colors of the



**Fig. 6.** (a) Schematic diagram of photothermal effect. (b) Surface temperature variation of samples under 300 W xenon lamp irradiation. (c) Temperature variation trend of samples.



**Fig. 7.** (a) Cell models of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (b) 3D surfaces of shear modulus of (a) BiVO<sub>4</sub> and (b) Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (c) 2D projection of shear modulus of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> along the (010) direction. (e) MSD of Fe<sup>3+</sup> with simulation time (773 K). (f) MSD of Fe element (298 K).

samples before and after doping change to some extent (Fig. S5).

To confirm Fe distribution in the surface of the BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample was subjected to XPS depth profiling technique by Ar<sup>+</sup> etching (Fig. 2d). As can be seen from the figure, the curve corresponding to 0 s clearly shows that the binding energies of the 2p orbitals of iron ion are

711.2 eV and 725.01 eV, respectively, indicating that the ion is mainly present in the form of Fe<sup>3+</sup> in Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> [41,45]. When the Ar<sup>+</sup> etching time increased to 10 s and 20 s, the intensity of the characteristic peak of Fe<sup>3+</sup> became significantly lower. Therefore, the content alteration of Fe in the sample presents a gradient distribution. The surface chemical

**Table 2** $C_{ij}$  values of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ .

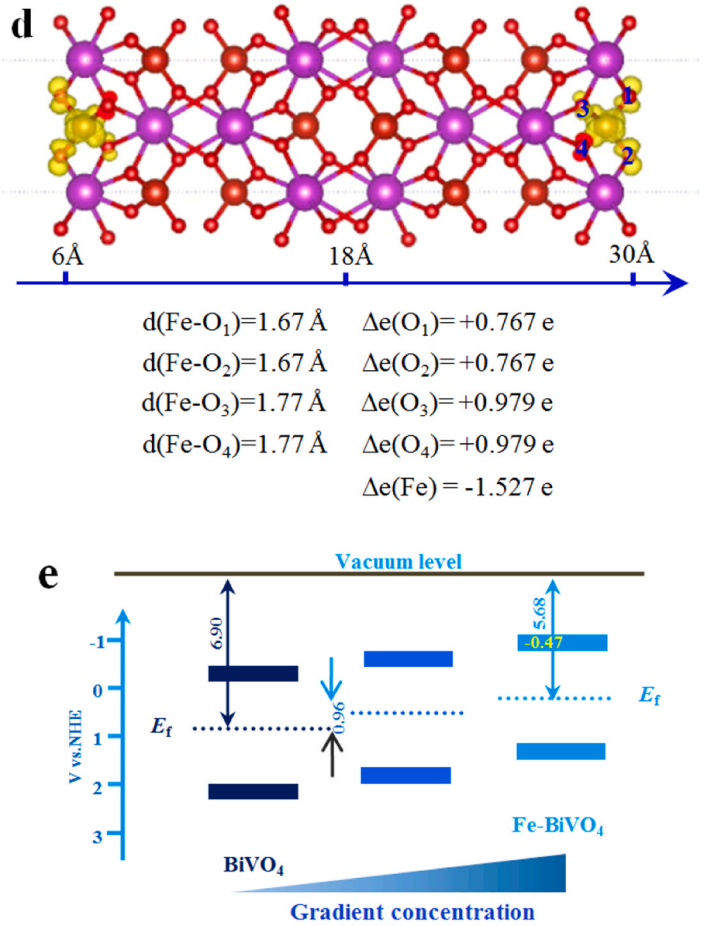
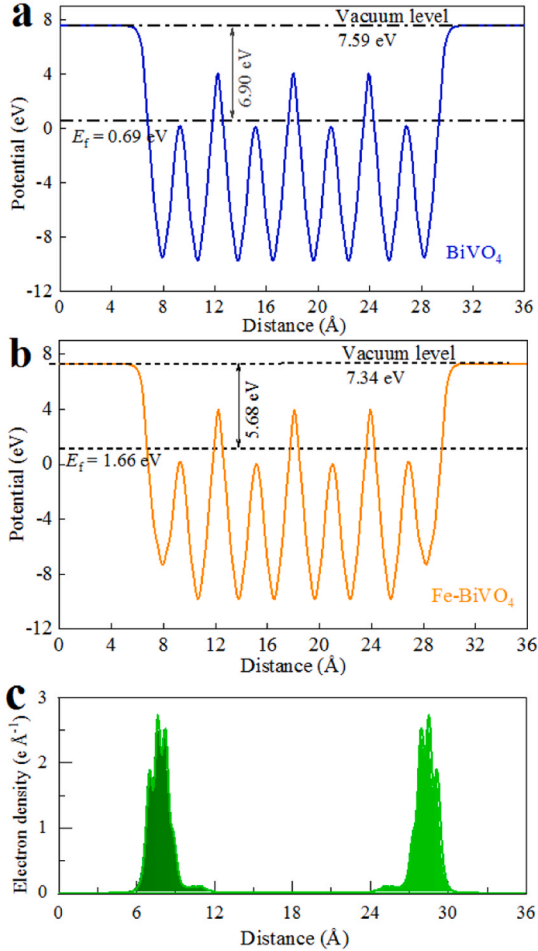
Substitution site		$C_{i1}$	$C_{i2}$	$C_{i3}$	$C_{i4}$	$C_{i5}$	$C_{i6}$
Fe→Bi	$C_{1j}$	149.89	43.64	5.78	-5.39	-43.28	16.93
	$C_{2j}$	43.64	149.35	-8.77	-3.98	-29.35	-32.59
	$C_{3j}$	5.78	-8.77	39.26	-4.81	-33.97	-10.74
	$C_{4j}$	-5.39	-3.98	-4.81	18.46	-16.74	2.22
	$C_{5j}$	-43.28	-29.35	-33.97	-16.74	-89.13	20.71
	$C_{6j}$	16.93	-32.59	-10.74	2.22	20.71	45.58
Fe→V	$C_{1j}$	190.09	116.13	98.24	0.00	0.00	20.36
	$C_{2j}$	116.13	181.26	94.52	0.00	0.00	-19.78
	$C_{3j}$	98.24	94.52	166.06	0.00	0.00	-0.14
	$C_{4j}$	0.00	0.00	0.00	44.51	-0.05	0.00
	$C_{5j}$	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.05	41.79	0.00
	$C_{6j}$	20.36	-19.78	-0.14	0.00	0.00	64.36

**Table 3**Calculated  $B_H$ ,  $G_H$ , the ratio of  $G_H/B_H$ ,  $E$ , and  $m$  of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  with/without oxygen vacancy.

Materials	$B_H$ (GPa)	$G_H$ (GPa)	$E$ (GPa)	$m$	$B_H/G_H$
$\text{BiVO}_4$	129.74	45.63	122.53	0.34	2.84
$\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$	127.59	42.70	115.25	0.35	2.99

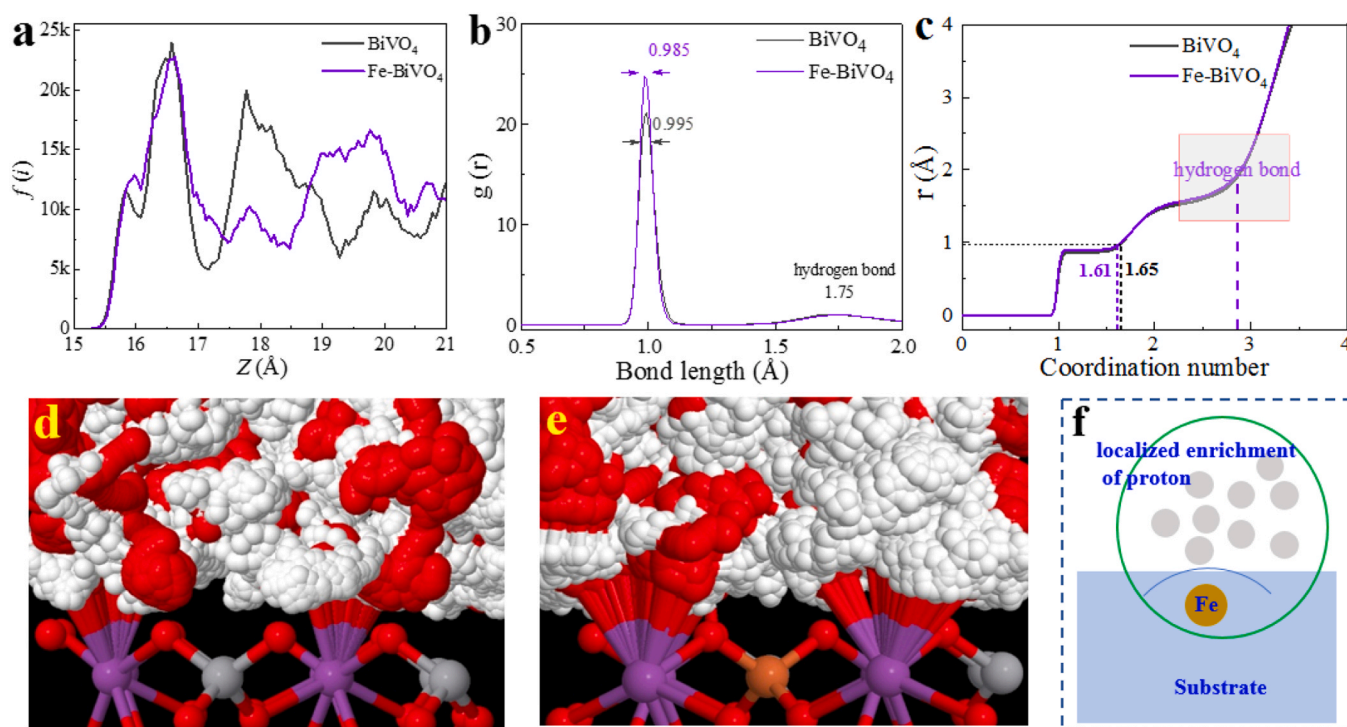
composition and chemical states of the  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  samples were determined by XPS (Figs. 2e, f). The presence of Bi, V, O and Fe elements on the sample surface was detected (Fig. S6). In the Bi 4f XPS spectra (Fig. 2e), the  $\text{BiVO}_4$  sample has two strong peaks at 164.4 eV and

159.1 eV belonging to Bi 4f<sub>5/2</sub> and Bi 4f<sub>7/2</sub> [46], corresponding to  $\text{Bi}^{3+}$ . Compared to the  $\text{BiVO}_4$  sample, the  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  sample has a shift of 0.2 eV in the position of Bi 4f<sub>5/2</sub> (164.2 eV) and Bi 4f<sub>7/2</sub> (158.9 eV). The peaks at 160.9 and 166.3 eV with higher binding energy can be attributed to  $\text{Bi}^{3+x}$  ions [47], which is because the doped Fe cannot provide enough valence electrons. In Fig. 2f, the V 2p binding energy in  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is 516.9 eV [48], demonstrating the presence of element V in the form of  $\text{V}^{5+}$  [49]. Compared to the  $\text{BiVO}_4$  sample, we can observe a shift of 0.3 eV (V 2p orbital binding energy of 516.6 eV) in the  $1\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$  sample, in addition to the presence of an additional peak at the binding energy of 518.5 eV, indicating that the iron doping in V site leads to a local elevation and decrease in the chemical state of its adjacent V



**Fig. 8.** (a, b) Calculated electrostatic potentials of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . (c, d) Photo-generated electron density of  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ . (e) Surface energy band gradient variation of  $\text{Fe-BiVO}_4$ .





**Fig. 9.** Statistical results of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules in BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O. (a) Hydrogen distribution along c axis. (b) Radial distributions in BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (c) Coordination number of H<sub>2</sub>O in systems. AIMD trajectory evolutions of BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O (d) and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O (e). (f) Localized enrichment of proton in near the doping site.

element. Such change is more favorable for the formation of stable structure. It can provide local polarization, which promote carrier transport and separation.

The different samples show a various response in the visible region (Fig. S7). One can find that the visible range of BiVO<sub>4</sub> is the smallest, while the visible absorption range of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> increases, which may be due to the enhanced absorption of light by lattice distortion. A large slope in the visible region suggests that the absorption of visible light is caused by the band gap transition of the material itself. The reported work has shown that BiVO<sub>4</sub> is a direct band-gap semiconductor [50]. The band gap is 2.48 eV and 2.42 eV for BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, respectively. Fig. S8 shows the N<sub>2</sub> adsorption-desorption isotherms and pore size distribution curves of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The isotherm shapes of both samples are similar with the type IV isotherm curves [51, 52]. When the relative nitrogen pressure was increased from 0 to one atmosphere, the nitrogen adsorption amounts of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> were also increased to 25.9 cm<sup>3</sup>/g and 28.6 cm<sup>3</sup>/g, respectively. Table S1 shows the BET specific surface area of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, where the specific surface area of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is 6.56 m<sup>2</sup>/g. The slightly higher specific surface area can promote the adsorption of reactants to some extent [53].

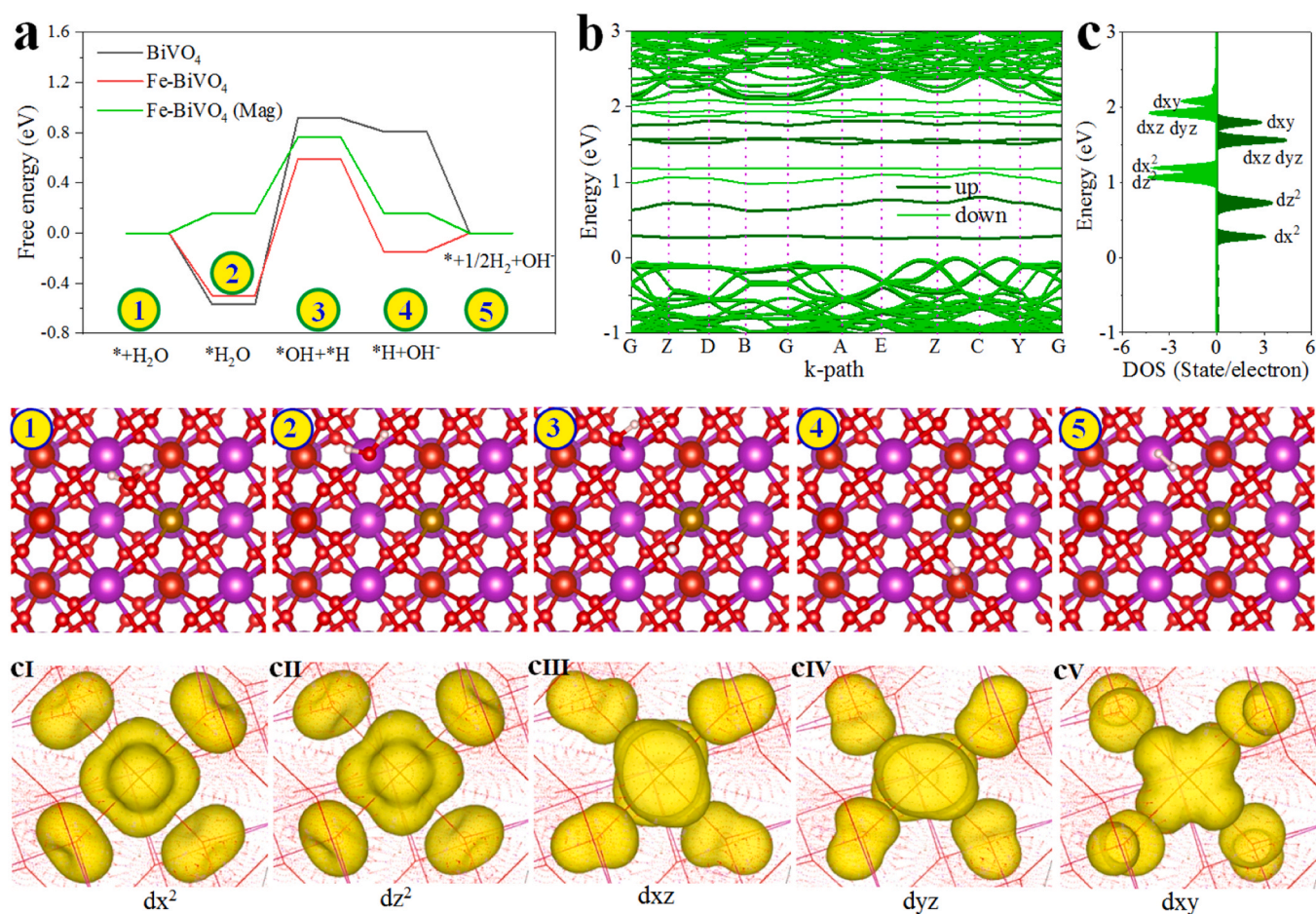
The charge mobility inside the semiconductor is one of the important factors affecting the photocatalytic activity. The radius of the electrochemical impedance (EIS) curve reflects the charge transfer resistance [54]. Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has the smaller radius than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 3a), implying a lower resistance. 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has the smallest radius, suggesting that the low charge transfer resistance in 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is favourable to the transport of photo-generated carriers. Fig. 3b shows Mott-Schottky (M-S) curves of samples. The slopes of the M-S curves of both BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are positive, indicating that they are n-type semiconductors [55]. The flat-band potentials of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, 3Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 6Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are −0.17 eV, −0.47 eV, −0.41 eV and −0.36 eV, respectively, and the flat-band potentials of n-type semiconductors can be approximated as the conduction band (CB) potential [56]. The CB potential of the sample is more negative than the redox

potential of the standard hydrogen electrode, which satisfies the thermodynamic prerequisite in the photocatalytic hydrogen production from water. Notably, the gradient Fe doping makes the CB of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> shift to a more negative position compared with 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (h) sample (Fig. S9). A shift of the CB position to a more negative direction can enhance the drive force of reduction reaction ability from thermodynamic aspect [57].

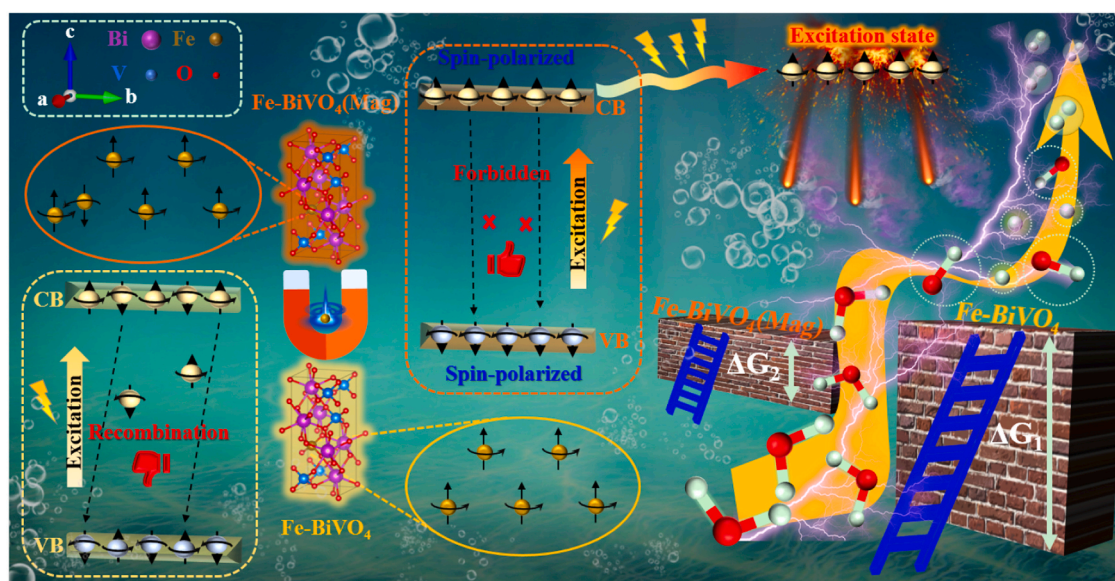
The electrochemical active surface area (ECSA) of the materials was studied by testing the non-Faraday window of the cyclic voltammetry (CV) curve, and the double-layer capacitance ( $C_{dl}$ ) of the catalyst was shown in Fig. 3c (also see Fig. S10). The  $C_{dl}$  of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is larger than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, indicating that 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has a higher active surface area with more active sites [58], which improves the photocatalytic hydrogen production performance. Here, we also used characteristic maximum frequency ( $f_{max}$ ) to reflect the relation between structure and carrier lifetime (Fig. 3d). Due to the inverse relationship between carrier lifetime and characteristic frequency ( $\tau$ , time constant,  $\tau = 1/2\pi f_{max}$ ) [59], it is inferred that the lifetime of free electrons in the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample is longer than that of other samples.

### 3.2. Photocatalytic performances and photothermal effect

As shown in Fig. 4a, BiVO<sub>4</sub> shows a high overpotential when reaching a current density of 10 mA cm<sup>−2</sup>, so the pure BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample has poor catalytic activity for hydrogen evolution rate (HER). Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> shows a relatively small overpotential at 10 mA cm<sup>−2</sup>, indicating that iron doping can effectively reduce the HER overpotential, sharply accelerate the kinetics of the H<sup>+</sup> reduction reaction and significantly improve the hydrogen evolution activity. To further investigate the reaction kinetics of HER of BiVO<sub>4</sub> with Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the Tafel curves of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> were tested (Fig. 4b). The Tafel slopes of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, 3Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 6Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> were 90.03 mV dec<sup>−1</sup>, 54.06 mV dec<sup>−1</sup>, 58.78 mV dec<sup>−1</sup> and 59.47 mV dec<sup>−1</sup>, respectively. The smaller Tafel slope, the faster current density increases, which means the reaction kinetic process is faster [60]. Compared with BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has a



**Fig. 10.** (a) Calculated the free energy of water dissociation for BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag). Arabic numeral (1–5) here correspond to different adsorption configurations. For instance, the second configuration corresponds to the  $*H_2O$  adsorption state. (b) Energy band structure of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Fermi level is set as zero. (c) Spin orbital coupling of Fe 3d. (ci-cv) Fe 3d orbitals in Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>.



**Fig. 11.** Proposed photocatalytic mechanism driven by electron spin state.

lower Tafel slope, indicating that Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has higher carrier density, which is associated with excellent reaction kinetics. The photocatalytic hydrogen production capacity of the prepared samples was evaluated. It

can be seen from Fig. 4c that Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has higher hydrogen production than BiVO<sub>4</sub> within 3 h. Here, a blank test was performed in the absence of photocatalyst. It was found that the hydrogen production in the



solution of triethanolamine and water without catalyst was zero, indicating that triethanolamine as an electron sacrificial agent can effectively prevent the recombination of electron-hole pairs, thus providing an indication for the structural modulation of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The HER rate of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> was significantly higher than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 4d). The hydrogen production rate of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is 61.51  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ . The results indicate that Fe<sup>3+</sup> doping can effectively open and improve the photocatalytic splitting of water for BiVO<sub>4</sub> (0  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ ), evidencing that Fe<sup>3+</sup> is a proper dopant for BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

In Fig. 4e, the hydrogen evolution rates of the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> maintain a stable state for three consecutive cycles, indicating that the photocatalytic activity of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has stable hydrogen evolution performance. The hydrogen evolution performance of the sample was tested again after 3600 h (in a vacuum drying oven). It was observed that the hydrogen evolution performance of the sample slightly decreased, but still had good hydrogen evolution activity, which showed that 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> had excellent chemical stability and good cycled stability of hydrogen evolution (also see Fig. S11, S12). And the HER ability of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is significantly higher than that of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (h) sample (Fig. S13). The photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production abilities of the samples were examined under simulated visible light irradiation with formic acid solution as sacrificial agent (Fig. 4f). The rate of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production for the BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample was 0.07  $\text{mg L}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ . The relatively higher H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production abilities were provided over Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, among which the rate of for 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> reached 0.32  $\text{mg L}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ . The schematic diagram of magnetization is shown in Fig. 5a. The applied magnetic field changes the spin state of doped iron elements in BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The device used is shown in Fig. S14. Here, the magnetization was performed for BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples, and photocatalytic hydrogen evolution experiments were conducted (Fig. 5b). The results indicate that the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance of BiVO<sub>4</sub> remains almost unchanged before and after magnetization. For magnetized 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) sample, the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance is significantly improved compared to the unmagnetized 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. At the first hour, it shows a 4-fold HER ability compared to 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. At this time, the quantum efficiency is close to 1.5%, which is as high as reported Pt<sup>II</sup>/C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> system [61]. At the third hour, HER ability of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) is still 2 times higher than that of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Overall, it is a functional relationship,  $y$  (hydrogen evolution) =  $(-362.38 \pm 9.97) \times e^{-t/(-0.84 \pm 0.07)} + (362.69 \pm 8.07)$ . The electrochemical results indicate that the reduction ability of photo-generated electrons is significantly improved after magnetization for 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The magnetization control of the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> before the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution reaction changed the spin state of iron in the sample. Essentially, enable electron deficient iron ions to receive more carrier replenishment. Electrochemically, it exhibits a left shift in the flat band potential (Fig. 5c). To confirm the magnetization role, we investigated the chemical state doped Fe in the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> sample (Fig. 5d). As can be seen, the curve of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> shows that the binding energy of 711.2 eV (2p 1/2) corresponds the Fe<sup>3+</sup>. When the magnetization is applied, the binding energy of the this peak shifts to 710.4 eV, which agrees with Fe<sup>(3-δ)+</sup>. The significantly lower binding energy indicates that the magnetization effectively regulates the electron spin state in 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) sample (also see Fig. 11).

We used TR-PL to explore the effect of magnetization on carrier lifetime of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 5e). The average lifetime  $\tau_{\text{avg}}$  of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is 3.91 ns and 4.13 ns, respectively. Nevertheless, the  $\tau_{\text{avg}}$  is prolonged to 5.49 ns for 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag). It evidences that the proper spin state can impede the recombination of carrier. Then the longer carrier lifetime in 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) provides the larger probability of electron participating in the HER. Table 1 shows the comparison of the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution rates of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> with those of previously reported photocatalysts. Different researchers used different sacrificial agents to study the hydrogen evolution performance of photocatalysts, for example, when ethanol was used as a sacrificial agent, and the photocatalytic HER rate of BiVO<sub>4</sub>/rGO is 11.5  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$

$\text{h}^{-1}$  [62].

To explore the relation between electron spin and the photothermal effect, we used several samples with obvious comparability to evidence photothermal conversion features (Fig. 6a). Under the irradiation of 5 min, the BiVO<sub>4</sub>, 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) show different temperature variation (Figs. 6b, c). For 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag), the surface temperature reaches to 67.3°C, which is higher than BiVO<sub>4</sub> (49.5°C) and 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (61.0°C). This suggests that the doped iron has prompted the strong photothermal effect. Thus, it indicates that the thermoelectric current ( $I = dQ/dt$ ) of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> is higher than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. More importantly, the magnetization further increases the thermoelectric current of the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Significantly, the magnetization can regulate the carrier density or transport properties for 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. More photothermal results on FTO and samples are provided in Fig. S15.

### 3.3. Structural stability, surface potential and solid/liquid interface characteristics

The cell models of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are shown in Fig. 7a. In these structures, each vanadium atom is attached to four oxygen atoms, called V-O bonds, and each bismuth atom is attached to eight oxygen atoms, called Bi-O bonds [65]. As we known, there are two metal sites (Bi and V) in BiVO<sub>4</sub>. In order to evidence replacing probability of Fe<sup>3+</sup>, we considered two cases of Fe<sup>3+</sup> doping in Bi or V site. The elastic constants  $C_{ij}$  of both cases were obtained by DFT calculation in Table 2. For monoclinic lattice, the Born elastic stability criteria [66] are recorded in the supporting information. The calculations show that the Fe<sup>3+</sup> substitution for V satisfies the stability criterion for the mechanical properties of the BiVO<sub>4</sub>, while the Fe<sup>3+</sup> substituting Bi site can cause instability of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. As the iron replacing Bi site in bismuth vanadate (Table S2), the  $\lambda_1 = -110.84 < 0$ . This indicates that the eigenvalue of the stiffness matrix does not meet elastic constant stability criteria. However, for BiVO<sub>4</sub> or Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fe→V), the eigenvalue of the stiffness matrix can meet elastic constant stability criteria. More information on structural stability of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, please see Fig. S16-S18.

Considering the arithmetic average relation of the effective modulus [67], the values of bulk modulus  $B_H$ , shear modulus  $G_H$ , the ratio of  $B_H/G_H$ , Young's modulus  $E$ , and Poisson's ratio were obtained according to the Voigt-Reuss-Hill (VRH) approximation, and the calculated results are listed in Table 3. As  $B_H/G_H > 1.75$  [68], the material will exhibit ductility. The values of  $B_H/G_H$  for both BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are greater than 1.75, indicating that BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> are structurally stable.

The results derived from the ELAM code [69] depict the 3D surface of the shear modulus and the 2D projection on the (010) direction (Figs. 7b-d). The 3D surface shows that both BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> have severely aspheric surfaces (Figs. 7b, c), indicating that they both have high shear modulus anisotropy. The greater deviation of the projected pattern of the elastic modulus, the higher degree of anisotropy of the solid material in that plane [70]. Along the (010) direction, BiVO<sub>4</sub> exhibits a large deviation (Fig. 7d), indicating a high shear modulus anisotropy. Thus the (010) facet of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> exhibits a local asymmetric structure property. Figs. 7e and f give the ion migration characteristics in BiVO<sub>4</sub> samples by calculating the mean square displacement (MSD). It shows the variation of the Fe element diffusion with simulation time, where the y-direction corresponds to the diffusion direction of Fe element along the (010) direction. It is noticed that the diffusion rate of Fe element is the largest in the (010) direction (773 K). It indicates that Fe element is more likely to enter the lattice of BiVO<sub>4</sub> from (010) facet. This indicates that the designed BiVO<sub>4</sub> with (010) facet is an excellent substrate for Fe element diffusion. AIMD simulation performed at 298 K suggests that Fe element has the lowest diffusion rate in (010) direction, indicating that (010) facet is more stable at room temperature.

Figs. 8a and b show the variations of the electrostatic potential energy of the BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> along the vertical surface direction. The potential energy curve in the vacuum region is a flat, which indicates that the potential energy function has converged in the vacuum region.



The Fermi level of Fe-BVO<sub>4</sub> (1.66 eV) is higher than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (0.69 eV). This difference in work function derives from charge accumulation in the iron enriched area in BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Due to the Fe-doped BiVO<sub>4</sub> has a higher Fermi energy level, it indicates that Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> has more electrons in equilibrium compared with BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The photo-generated electron density of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> was calculated using DFT (Figs. 8c, d). The yellow represents the electron accumulation region, which evidences the increased electron cloud density. This suggests that the directional transfer of electrons from the bulk phase of BiVO<sub>4</sub> to the surface area enriched with iron. Bader charge calculation indicates that locally doped iron loses 1.527 e (Fig. 8d). By further calculating the Bader charges of iron oxide (monoclinic phase and hexagonal phase), we find that the iron ions lose 1.323 e and 1.349 e, respectively (Figs. S19, S20). These results indicate that the doped iron ion in BiVO<sub>4</sub> is trivalent. Based on the theoretical calculations mentioned above, the gradient potential and Fermi level distribution characteristics on the surface of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> induced by iron doping are presented here (Fig. 8e). Overall, iron doping effectively promotes the effective transfer of photo-generated electrons from bulk to surface defect sites.

Fig. 9a shows the distribution of hydrogen elements on the surfaces of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Compared to the surface of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, iron doping in the surface can significantly enrich hydrogen to propel the possibility of HER. In the BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O systems, there is also a slight difference in the hydrogen oxygen bond length for water molecules (Fig. 9b), and the bond length in the Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O system is substantially lower than that in the BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O system. If the hydrogen oxygen bond length is the same, the coordination number of H<sub>2</sub>O in Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O system is markedly smaller than that of oxygen in BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O system (Fig. 9c), indicating that water is more easily dissociated in Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O system. We investigated the AIMD trajectories of BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O (Figs. 9d, e). It is observed that there are differentiated distribution characteristics of hydrogen elements. Iron doping site promotes localized enrichment of hydrogen (Fig. 9f), which is caused by the attraction of protons generated by the local electron enrichment effect.

### 3.4. Electron spin driven photocatalytic mechanism

Fig. 10a shows the hydrogen evolution free energy of different systems. It can be seen that the BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> systems exhibit spontaneous adsorption of water. For all systems, the dissociation process of water is a non-spontaneous process. This also indicates that the dissociation reaction of water is a rate determining step for all systems. The dissociation free energy of water is 1.48, 1.09 and 0.61 eV in BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag), respectively. Fig. 10b shows the energy band structures of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. BiVO<sub>4</sub> exhibits the semiconductor properties of the indirect band gap (Fig. S21). The multiple energy levels generated by doped iron fill the bandgap space of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 10b). Iron doping forms local splitting of the spin orbitals at the bottom of the BiVO<sub>4</sub> CB, and affects the CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. For example, at point G, a clear splitting originates from the 6p orbital splitting of Bi atoms in BiVO<sub>4</sub>. This interaction among spin orbitals is beneficial for the spatial transition of photo-generated electrons between doping sites and adjacent metal sites. The d-orbital in the doping site undergoes a typical spin orbital splitting, and the order of energy levels is  $d_{xy} > d_{xz} = d_{yz} > d_{z^2}$  (Fig. 10c). Their real spatial orbitals are shown in the Fig. 11cI-eV. Here, the spin splitting of d orbital adjacent to the CB can evidently drive the carrier transport within the Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> system.

Fig. 11 gives the photocatalytic mechanism driven by electron spin state. For BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the iron doping can decrease overpotential, prolong carrier lifetime, and activate HER. Simultaneously, it can also reduce the dissociation reaction free energy of water to some extent. Significantly, magnetization enhances substantially the reduction ability of photo-generated electrons, prolongs markedly carrier lifetime, and boost evidently thermoelectric current. It is worth noting that magnetization changes the water adsorption free energy of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>, and it approaches

0. More importantly, the magnetization can prominently optimize the dissociation free energy of water. It indicates that the adjustment of local electron spin states can significantly increase the carrier lifetime efficiently regulate the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, we achieved an electron spin regulated hydrogen evolution reaction for Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. DFT calculations indicate that doped Fe<sup>3+</sup> replacing V site can form stable chemical structure for BiVO<sub>4</sub>. It indicates that the doped Fe<sup>3+</sup> can activate HER of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> compared to negligible hydrogen production of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Theoretical calculations evidence that the defect sites in surface layers of Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> can enrich the photo-generated electrons. The results proclaim that the Fe ions doping effectively improves the carrier transport ability and significantly reduces the carrier recombination probability. The 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mag) increases tremendously the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance compared with that of 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. And, the relationship between photocatalytic hydrogen evolution and reaction time conforms to the  $y$  (hydrogen evolution) =  $(-362.38 \pm 9.97) \times e^{-t/(-0.84 \pm 0.07)} + (362.69 \pm 8.07)$  function. It is confirmed that the magnetization can enhance the current density in photocatalysis for the 1Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Additionally, we find that the magnetization further prolongs the carrier lifetime and optimizes the rate determining step free energy of water dissociation (0.61 eV) for Fe-BiVO<sub>4</sub>. This work highlights a new viewpoint to understand the effect of electron spin on photocatalytic hydrogen evolution performance.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Ying Sun:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation. **Jagadeesh Suriyaprakash:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Lianwei Shan:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Huanyan Xu:** Methodology, Conceptualization. **Jiawei Zhang:** Investigation, Data curation. **Guangri Chen:** Investigation, Data curation. **Yinjun Zhang:** Visualization, Data curation. **Haitao Wu:** Methodology, Conceptualization. **Xuexiao Li:** Methodology, Investigation. **Limin Dong:** Methodology, Conceptualization. **Junchen Li:** Investigation, Data curation. **Minghua Pang:** Methodology, Investigation. **Dan Li:** Methodology, Investigation.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.apcatb.2024.124209](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2024.124209).

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